

Health group raises alarm on climate change threat to children; Campaign aims to give parents tools, resources to protect kids from heat-related diseases

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Body

Heat stroke, Lyme disease and asthma were once seen as rare conditions that only sporadically cropped up in Ontario.

But climate change means these once far-off risks have become grave threats to the health of children in the province, according to a new public health campaign launching Wednesday.

"Climate change is the greatest threat to human health in the 21st century," said Pegeen Walsh, executive director at the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA), which is launching makeitbetterontario.ca, a health information website for parents.

The website is part of OPHA's #MakeItBetter campaign - the first public health initiative in Ontario to link climate change and children's health.

"Our research shows that Ontarians aren't aware of the health impacts of climate change. People think about something that's far off, like melting glaciers in Greenland or starving polar bears. But there hasn't been enough attention on something that's much closer and more precious: our own children."

As the Star highlighted in its recent Undeniable series on climate change, heat waves in Canada are already becoming more frequent and intense, and they're worse in urban environments where concrete and pavement absorb heat during the day and radiate it at night. Children are particularly susceptible to heat stroke - a condition which, if left untreated, can kill within hours.

Warmer summers have also brought ticks carrying Lyme disease further into Canada, where the disease was once a rarity. Lyme disease diagnoses in Ontario have increased tenfold in the last six years.

Smog is made worse by heat, which can exacerbate asthma - a leading cause of hospital admissions for children that disproportionately affects those in low-income, urban neighbourhoods.

"The science is showing that there are direct links between global warming and health," Walsh said, adding that parents can visit the website to learn more about these health conditions and how to prevent them.

"We wanted a very empowering campaign that would give parents tools and resources that allow them to feel that there are actions they can take to protect their children against those risks."

Approaching climate change from a public health perspective has been a successful strategy for cutting across politics in the U.S. Instead of making the conversation about economic policy, taxation and electricity grids, public

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health authorities have found talking to people about heat waves and water shortages brings an immediacy to the issue and spurs people into action.

"Ideally climate change should be a non-partisan issue," Walsh said. "It's very tough to get people engaged around environmental issues because they often feel very powerless. We saw research about this approach in the U.S. where when the conversation started to shift toward health, people started to get more engaged because they saw that it had immediate impacts on them and their families."

Beyond knowing how to recognize the symptoms of heat stroke and how to check for ticks, Walsh hopes the campaign will spur parents to take action and "climate proof" their communities long term.

"We're asking people to commit to being informed and take the next steps in their community to help everyone adapt to climate change: have conversations with their neighbours and think of other ways to get involved in their community to protect children."

The website asks visitors to sign a pledge to take their climate action further by getting involved in local initiatives to transform communities so they're healthier and more resistant to climate change.

This could be as easy as planting a tree to combat the urban heat island effect, or speaking to local elected representatives about improving public transit and building cycling paths.

"The great thing about these things are they have what are known as co-benefits. If people are walking to transit or using their bicycles, they're reducing their carbon emissions, but they're also reducing chronic diseases. So, by tackling climate change we can also improve our health and well being."

She added that public health authorities are building bridges with urban planning officials to create more "health-centric" communities - highlighting how green space can both reduce local heat islands while also improving mental health. In contrast, urban sprawl increases both carbon emissions from vehicles and rates of diabetes, as people are less likely to walk in sprawled communities and there's limited access to public transportation.

"There are immediate steps that parents can take now to minimize climate-related health risks to their children," Walsh said. "But ultimately we need to act on climate change."

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